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Registered Charity number 1101576

Company registered number 4876990

**Bridport and District Citizens Advice**

**Annual Report 2020-21**

**What we do**

Bridport and District is a key local charity

We provide free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. We value diversity, promote equality and challenge discrimination.

We aim to provide the advice people need for the problems they face and improve the policies and practices that affect people’s lives.

**Collaboration**

We value partnership working and collaboration. We lead on the Local Advice Network and work closely with other organisations including, Bridport Local Area Partnership, West Dorset Mencap, local foodbanks and Wessex Water. Together with the other Dorset Citizens Advice we staff a single point of access for telephone advice, the Dorset Adviceline.

**5040** calls answered by Local Citizens Advice in Dorset Unitary area

**831** calls answered by Bridport & District



**Adviceline**

**Key Activities 2019-20**

We helped 2,340 clients with 6943 separate issues in 2019/20. Activities record the separate pieces of work done on behalf of the client such as telephone calls a face to face contact or email.

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| **Clients** | 2,340 |
| **Issues** | 6,943 |
| **Activities** | 7,674 |

Benefits and debt accounted for over half of the issues people sought help with while housing, employment and relationship issues accounted for the next biggest categories.

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| **Enquiry Area** | **Issues** | **%** |
| Benefits & tax credits | 1,958 | 28% |
| Benefits Universal Credit | 1,212 | 17% |
| Debt | 715 | 10% |
| Housing | 607 | 9% |
| Employment | 453 | 7% |
| Relationships & family | 375 | 5% |
| Utilities & communications | 318 | 5% |
| Other | 310 | 4% |
| Consumer goods & services | 269 | 4% |
| Legal | 203 | 3% |
| Financial services & capability | 144 | 2% |
| Health & community care | 139 | 2% |
| Tax | 90 | 1% |
| Travel & transport | 71 | 1% |
| Immigration & asylum | 45 | 1% |
| Discrimination & Hate & GVA | 20 | 0% |
| Education | 14 | 0% |
| **Grand Total** | **6,943** | **100%** |

We work with some of the most vulnerable and nearly half our clients report a disability or long term health problem, often relating to a mental health issue. Many vulnerable clients require in depth help and often have multiple problems.

**46%** of our clients are disabled or have a long term health condition

**31%** of these conditions related to mental health

Clients predominantly seek help via face to face channels at our main office and outreaches in Beaminster and Lyme Regis accounting for just under half of the activities by this channel. Email contacts and webchat increased over the previous year. Webchat as a contact channel was first introduced in 2019 for our Help to Claim project. We have been developing a new website over the last year with the aim of improving access to advice and a more structured email contact method to improve this channel. The website should be fully functional in the near future.

We were able to fund our specialist benefits caseworker to help clients with complex cases and tribunal representation thanks to a significant grant from the Access to Justice Foundation. The Bureau maintained its Mencap project helping people with learning disabilities manage their finances and our specialist Wessex Water project work. Our debt casework service capacity was strengthened by grants from Alice Ellen Cooper Dean and Valentine Trust to train an existing member of staff as a debt specialist.

We were also very pleased to obtain separate funding for a new benefits project from April 2019: 'Help to Claim' is funded by the DWP and co-ordinated nationally by Citizens Advice. The service provides help for people to make initial claims to universal credit and service delivery is through multiple channels; webchat through the national website, a national telephone helpline and face to face. We helped 227 people in the first year of the project.

This service is vital as the numbers of people claiming this benefit increase, accelerated by the Covid-19 emergency. In fact, our most significant trend last year was a 100% increase in universal credit issues compared to the previous year while the demand for help with other benefit issues has remained steady.

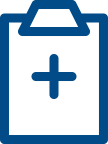
We provide 6 months high quality training for new advisers and we have been able to maintain good numbers of volunteer staff. We have reduced training costs through shared training initiatives and greater use of volunteer support. We maintained training of a new adviser group during the Covid-19 emergency through introducing remote video tutorials.

 **Trends**

The tables below lists the main enquiry areas and change in number of issues compared to the previous year and the top 3 benefit issues.

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| **Enquiry Area** | **2019-20** | **2018-20** | **% Change** |
| Benefits & tax credits | 1,958 | 2,013 | -3% |
| Benefits Universal Credit | 1,212 | 595 | 104% |
| Debt | 715 | 699 | 2% |
| Housing | 607 | 633 | -4% |
| Employment | 453 | 576 | -21% |
| Relationships & family | 375 | 536 | -30% |
| Utilities & communications | 318 | 212 | 50% |
| Other | 310 | 246 | 26% |

Increases in universal credit enquiries reflect the increased number of claimants and additional project funding secured to manage this. There is an increase in the ‘Other’ category which mainly covers foodbank referrals and charitable support. We saw decreases in employment and relationship/family issues last year but anticipate that these will increase again this year following the impact of Covid-19.

 **Top Issues**

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| --- | --- |
| **Top 3 issues** | |
| **Benefits** | |
| Universal Credit Initial Claim | 642 |
| Personal independence payment | 530 |
| Employment Support Allowance | 328 |
| **Debt** | |
| Council tax arrears | 111 |
| Credit, store & charge card debts | 82 |
| Other | 60 |
| **Housing** | |
| Private sector rented property | 155 |
| Housing association property | 87 |
| Threatened homelessness | 73 |

**Impact**

We record case outcomes through our comprehensive case monitoring system. Our assistance resulted in financial gains of nearly £1 million for our clients in 2019-20 and £100,000 in debts written off by our debt casework team.

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| --- | --- |
| **Financial Outcomes 2019/20** | **Amount** |
| Income gain | £959,321 |
| Debts written off | £106,055 |
| Re-imbursements, services, loans | £20,605 |





**132** clients assisted with homelessness problems and access to accommodation.

Overall we assisted clients with 190 separate issues relating to; actual and threatened homelessness, the homelessness service and access to and provision of accommodation.

In independent surveys of our clients’ experience of the service, 87% of those surveyed reported that we helped them find a way forward with their problem while 91% of clients would recommend us to others. Citizens Advice research shows we make positive impacts on the lives of our clients through, for example, reduced stress and improved finances following advice.



**87%** of our clients told us we helped them find a way forward

**91%** would recommend our service

Research and campaigning activities have continued to focus on universal credit. Successes include campaigning to use the local satellite jobcentre office in Bridport for new claims and ID verification appointments rather than claimants having to make often lengthy travel journeys to the main office in Weymouth. We continue to campaign for a vulnerable claimant policy to ensure that vulnerable universal credit claimants are identified quickly and get the appropriate help and support they need.

**Audit**

In our last annual audit of governance by our national Citizens Advice in January 2020 we scored the highest mark in each of the 9 audit categories, including governance, business planning and financial management. Our quality of advice is rigorously assessed and of a high standard.

**Thank you**

We would like to thank all our supporters including: Access to Justice, Alice Ellen Cooper Dean, Valentine Trust, Bridport Car Boot Fund, Brit Valley Rotary Club, Bridport, Beaminster and Lyme Regis Town Councils, Lions Club, Morrisons, Parish Councils, Wessex Water, Yarn Barton Community Centre, and our main funder Dorset Council for financial assistance and support in 2019-20.

As always we are extremely grateful to our very dedicated team of volunteers who make our service the great community resource it is.

**BRIDPORT & DISTRICT CITIZENS ADVICE**

**Contact us:**

**Dorset Adviceline:** 03444 111 444

**Local Telephone:** 01308 456594

**Email:** advice@bridport-cab.org.uk

**Website:** [www.citizensadvice.org.uk/](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/)local/bridport-district/

We had to temporarily suspend face to face advice from 18 March 2020 due to the Covid-19 emergency but we plan to start offering limited drop in sessions at our main office, 45 South Street Bridport from the end of July 2020 and expand this as the Government guidance allows.